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AUTHOR Olson-Johnson, Susan
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ABSTRACT

This paper compares the prescribed American and Chinese letter writing formats as outlined in texts and examines actual letters from American and Chinese writers to determine how they compared to these formats and, if they differed, to identify possible reasons for these differences. After teaching students of Mandarin Chinese a basic lesson on how to write letters in Chinese, the author examines the effect of instruction in Chinese letter format by assigning each to write a letter. English and Chinese texts were used; the first were written for English-speaking children learning to write letters and the second, for non-native adult speakers of Mandarin Chinese learning how to write letters in Chinese. Results indicate that the most striking difference is the position of the date. The ordering of the dates in each group was basically consistent with the textbook formats. The two groups of 20 letters showed that the American writers had more variety and individual differences than the Chinese in the way they wrote the date. The Chinese writers displayed more inconsistencies than the Americans in the other parts of the letters. The responses of the students of Mandarin Chinese show that their letters had less variation in their salutations and closing compliments. (Contains 5 references.) (CK)

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A Contrastive Analysis of Mandarin Chinese and American English Letter-Writing Formats and an Investigation into the Instruction of These Formats

Susan Olson-Johnson

Introduction

Being the avid letter writer that I am, upon returning from my first trips to Taiwan and Mainland China, I found myself corresponding often with the friends that I had met there through writing letters. Since I had never previously read a Chinese letter, nor had I ever been taught in my Chinese classes how to write one, I started by simply using the English format while writing in Chinese. As I received more and more letters from my Chinese friends, I began to notice the differences in the formats of their letters and mine, and also the differences among individual Chinese letter writers. I wondered two things: 1) if those differences among individuals were due to being influenced by the format I was using, and 2) what the prescriptive format for Chinese letters actually was. The purpose of this study was two-fold: 1) to compare the prescribed American and Chinese letter writing formats as outlined in texts, then to look at actual letters from American and Chinese writers to find out how they compared to these formats; then, if they differed, to identify possible reasons for these differences; 2) to examine the effect of instruction of the Chinese letter format—after teaching students of Mandarin Chinese a basic lesson on how to write letters in Chinese, assign them to each write one, then see what format they used.

This paper will be divided into two parts. The first part will attempt to answer the first set of research questions: 1) How do the prescriptive American and Chinese letter formats differ? 2) Do actual letters written by Americans and Chinese go along with these prescriptive formats? 3) If not, how do they differ from the prescriptive formats and why?

The second part will examine the second set of research questions: 1) After American learners of Chinese have received instruction on the Chinese letter format, do they use the format when writing Chinese letters? 2) Why or why not do they use the 'correct' format?

Part One

Subjects and Methodology

The English texts which I used as a guide were *SWAK: The complete book of mail for kids* (R. Harelson, 1981) and *P.S. Write soon! All about letters (grades 4-8)* (1982) by the United States Postal Service. These were written for native English-speaking children learning to write letters. The Chinese texts I used were *Practical Chinese letter writing* by D. K. Chinn (1980) and *New practical systematic Chinese teaching materials: Chinese letter writing manual, vol. 1* by X. Liu and Y. Li (1988). These, on the other hand, were written for non-native adult speakers of Mandarin Chinese learning how to write letters in Chinese. I could not find any textbooks written for native Chinese which discussed letter writing formats, so I was only able to use those written for native English-speaking learners of Mandarin.

I identified the main components of the two formats using these texts. Then I took twenty casual letters that Americans had written me and twenty letters that Chinese had written me to compare them to the identified formats. Among the Americans who had written me letters, all of which were friends and family members, there were eight males and twelve females, between the ages of 20 and 45. Among the Chinese who had written me letters, all were Taiwanese females between the ages of 18 and 26. Thus we see that the Chinese group was much more homogenous than the American group.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows a side by side comparison of the two letter formats, as prescribed by the examined

Susan Olson-Johnson recieved her BA in Spanish and secondary education at BYU. After serving a mission in Taiwan, she returned to get her TESL certificate. She is currently working on an MA in Chinese language acquisition and is teaching beginning Mandarin.

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American Letter Format/Example	Chinese Letter Format/Example
1. Heading (date)/'July 5, 1991'	1. Salutation (name) / 'Sushan' (Susan)
2. Greeting (Dear+Name)/ 'Dear Susan,'	2.Complimentary Greeting/'Nǐ hǎo ma?' (How are you?)
3. Body	3. Body
4. Closing / 'Love,'	4. Closing Compliment/'Zhù píngan kuàilè' (Wish: peace, joy)
5. Signature / 'Pamela'	5. Signature a. 'yǒu' (friend) b. 'Lijuan' (name) c. 'shàng' (respectfully)
6. Postscript / 'P.S. ...'	6. Date / 91.4.18
	7. Postscript / 'Fù ...' add...)

Table 1: Casual letter formats with examples

texts. The most striking difference is the position of the date—in the American format the date is at the very beginning, while in the Chinese format, the date comes at the end, before the postscript. Another obvious difference is that the prescriptive order of the date in English is 'month, day, year', while the order in Chinese goes from general to specific—'year, month, day'. Another difference usually noticed by both sides is that the prescriptive American format for the casual letter requires a 'dear' before the name, while the Chinese only includes the name, with nothing equivalent to 'dear'.

Table 2—American Letter Samples/Percentage that Used Prescriptive Format

Part of Format	#	%
1. Heading	19	95%
2. Greeting (Dear+Name)	14	70%
3. Body	20	100%
4. Closing	20	100%
5. Signature	20	100%
6. Postcript[1]		

Table 3—Chinese Letter Samples/Percentage that Used Prescriptive Format

Part of Format	#	%
1. Salutation	8	40%
2. Comp. gr.	14	70%
3. Body	20	100%
4. Clos. comp.	10	50%
5. Signature A.	0	0%
B.	20	100%
C.	6	30%
6. Date	16	80%
7. Postcript[2]		

Table 2 shows how the 20 letters written by Americans compared to the prescribed textbook format, while Table 3 shows how the other 20 letters written by Chinese compared to the textbook format. In looking at Tables 2 and 3, it seems that most of the Americans prescribed to the 'correct' format, while more of the Chinese did not prescribe to the 'correct' Chinese format. This is a surprising result, since American society and culture is usually viewed as being more individualistic, while Chinese society and culture is usually viewed as being more conformative. (Hammond, 1992) Because the results seem a little surprising when looking at them from the surface, it is useful to take a deeper look.

Tables 4-6 show the variation of the formats used in the American letter samples (ALS). Thus, we can better see how the Americans did or did not conform with the prescriptive format.

By looking at Table 4 and at the actual examples of the variation in the date, it is obvious that, although most Americans used the prescriptive form of the date, many did not. As shown below, there were nine different variations in the form, punctuation, and order of the date. Fifty-five percent used the order 'month, day, year', while 30% used the order 'day, month, year. Just in the last few years, the latter way of ordering the date has become popular in the United States. As far as punctuation went, however, there was no systematicity in the American headings.

ALS VARIATION OF FORMAT

Table 4—ALS Variation in Heading

Date Format	#	%
Month Day Year	11	55%
Day Month Year	6	30%
Month Day	1	5%
Month Year	1	5%
No date	1	5%

Actual Examples of the Variation in the Date

July 5, 1991	May 4 1991	4/1/91
13-May-91	22 Dec 91	12 April 1992
4-9-91	March 21	Dec 91' [*sic*]

Table 5—ALS Variation in Greeting

Greeting format	#	%
Dear+Name	14	70%
Name only	5	25%
Other	1	5%

Table 6—ALS Variation in Closing

Closing format	#	%
'Love,'	14	70%
Other	6	30%

In the greetings and closings, 70% used 'Dear' and 'Love,' while the rest of the writers used something else. Examples of other things used in the greetings are "To..." or "Hello...." Examples of other things used in the closings were "Your friend," or "Sincerely." There was much less variation in the greetings and closings than there was in the headings in the American letter samples.

Tables 7-10 show the variation of formats used in the Chinese letter samples (CLS). In looking at these letters, it is clear that there is more variation overall in the CLS than in the ALS (with the exception of the American date format). In some cases, the Chinese format even tends more towards the American format. For example, Table 7 shows that 60% of the writers included 'Dear', while Table 8 shows that 40% of the writers included 'Love.'

CLS VARIATION IN FORMAT

Table 7—CLS Variation in Salutation

Salutation format	#	%
Dear+Name	12	60%
Name only	8	40%

Table 8—CLS Variation in Signature

Signature format	#	%
Name only	12	60%
'Love,...'	8	40%

Table 9—CLS Variation in Date Positioning

Position of date	#	%
After signature	16	80%
Before salutation	2	10%
No date	2	10%

Table 9 shows that most of the writers placed the date after the signature, as prescribed. In Table 10, we see that 65% of the Chinese writers used the prescriptive order of the date, from general to specific (50% wrote 'year, month, day', and 15% wrote 'month, day', with no year). Twenty percent used the prescriptive American format, while 5% (or one writer) used the order 'day, month, year'. The punctuation of the date is interesting, because the majority of the Chinese who wrote the date (18 out of 19 writers) used periods to separate the parts of the date, such as '91.4.18'. The other person used the Chinese characters for 'month' and 'day' after the numbers. Another interesting point was that none of the Chinese writers used Chinese characters for the numerals; they all used Arabic numerals.

Table 10—CLS Variation in Date Ordering

Ordering of parts of date	#	%
Year Month Day	10	50%
Month Day Year	4	20%
Month Day	3	15%
Day Month Year	1	5%
No date	2	10%

Conclusions

The ordering of the dates in each group was basically consistent with the textbook formats. The two groups of twenty letters showed that the American writers had more variety and individual differences than the Chinese in the way they wrote the date, whereas the ordering and the punctuation of the dates written by Chinese were much more uniform. This is perhaps a manifestation of the individualism of American society, as mentioned above.

Besides the date, the Chinese writers displayed more inconsistency than the Americans in the other parts of the letters, probably due to Western influence—in all cases, I was the first to start writing to them, and I had used the American format in my Chinese letters, until I figured out some of the differences. These Chinese writers were probably influenced in the format they used by the fact that they were writing to me, an American. They wrote 'Dear' in their salutations almost as much as the American writers. Western influence (or my influence, rather) was probably also the reason for their positioning of the date in front of the salutation, and for the occurrences of 'love' before the signature.

Part Two

Subjects and Methodology

The subjects of the second half of this project were my thirteen students of Mandarin. Twelve of them were Americans and one of them was a Chinese from Hong Kong, whose native language is Cantonese. I gave the students each a copy of a letter that one of my Chinese friends had written

to them. I briefly went over the components of the letter and let students bring up the main differences that they noticed between American and Chinese letters, while explaining some others that they did not notice. I also told students how, in some ways, the letter received by the friend did not go along with the prescriptive Chinese format. For example, the girl had written "*Qinài de Sushan de xuésheng*" ('Dear Susan's students'). I explained that this might be because she was writing to Americans. After this brief instruction period, I assigned them to write back to the girl that had written to them. I used the letters they wrote as the data base for the second half of this project.

Results and Discussion

Tables 11-14 show how the Chinese letters written by the students learning Mandarin compared to the textbook format of Chinese letters. By looking at Tables 11 and 12, it is obvious that the learners had less variation in their salutations and closing compliments. Table 11 shows that only one student used the Chinese equivalent of 'Dear' in the salutation, and interestingly enough, that one student was the Cantonese girl! She probably did this because in the letter that I had given them copies of, the girl writing to them had used 'Dear'. The other students did not use it, probably because that is one thing that I brought up in class as not being part of a usual Chinese letter. In Table 13, 'part c' the signature was only used by one person—also e Cantonese girl. The American students probably did not use it because the letter they had received had not included it; the Cantonese girl might have used it because its inclusion suggests a slight note of formality, perhaps used because the girl she is writing to is a stranger. Table 14 shows that two students put the date at the beginning of the letter, probably because of transfer from the English format. Incidentally, all of the students ordered the date from general to specific, as the Chinese do.

CHINESE LETTER FORMAT USED BY LEARNERS AFTER INSTRUCTION

Table 11—Learners' Variation in Salutation

Salutation format	#	%
Name only	12	92%
Dear+name	1	8%

Table 12—Learners' Variation in Closing Compliment

Clos. Comp. format	#	%
With 'zhù' (wish)	12	92%
Other	1	8%

Table 13—Learners' Variation in Signature

Format of Signature	#	%
a. used 'yǒu'	7	54%
no 'yǒu'	5	38%
other	1	8%
b. signature	13	100%
c. used 'shàng'	1	8%
no 'shang'	12	92%

Table 14—Learners' Variation in Date

Position of date	#	%
After signature	10	77%
Before salutation	2	15%
No date	1	8%

One interesting point is that many of the students used Chinese characters instead of Arabic numerals in the date. Students of a language sometimes have a sense of 'purity'—wanting to keep everything they do in the target language, even though no natives in the sample used did this.

Conclusions

Overall, instruction seemed to have worked. Most of the students did not use 'dear', included an appropriate closing compliment using 'zhù', ordered the date correctly, and placed the date after the signature. One obvious difference noted, however, was that more than half of the American students used Chinese characters as opposed to Arabic numerals in the dates. They are perhaps overusing them because they do not realize how widely used the Arabic numerals are in China.

For a letter writer like me, having been taught how to write a letter in Chinese and given an opportunity to do so would have been exciting and useful to me. It seems that instruction that consists of raising the learners' awareness of the differences between American and Chinese letter formats is enough to be helpful to learners. Giving them the opportunity to communicate with Chinese people through letter writing is also valuable to their language learning process for many other reasons not discussed in the present paper.

Ideas for further study

In order to compare the two casual letter formats, it would have been useful if I could have located some Chinese books written for Chinese children on writing letters, since those were the types I used for identifying the American format. I was only able to locate books written for American students learning Chinese, and the Chinese format presented in these texts might be a little

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more formal than those that might be presented in texts for children.

In order to be able to make a better comparison between actual casual letters and the textbook formats, it would be better to use groups of letters written by native language speakers to other native speakers of that same language, since the fact that these people were writing to me most likely influenced their format. I would need to get letters written by native Chinese people to other native Chinese people, and preferably letters written and sent in Taiwan, so as to avoid American influence. Doing this would give a truer idea of how Taiwanese Chinese people tend to format their letters, because there would probably be less Western influence. It would also be interesting to get letters from Mainland Chinese, to see if the common format used is the same or different.

Having a more homogenous group of subjects in Part One of the study would have been helpful. The American group consisted of males and females over a broad range of ages, while the Chinese group consisted of only females in a constricted age range. The Chinese letters were also only from friends, while the American letters were from friends and relatives. In order to make a more reliable comparison, the two groups would need to be more similar.

It would be interesting to compare a group of English letters written by native Chinese speakers to Americans, to see what format the Chinese people used after receiving instruction on the American format. I had only four such letters (not enough to make significant comparisons), all of which contained the date at the end, but which included things like 'dear' and 'love', showing both Chinese and English influence.

Yet another meaningful analysis would be a comparison of the actual discourse and the content of the letters, instead of just looking at the format. It would also be interesting to examine how learners of Chinese progress in their acquisition of this discourse and other communicative strategies through letter writing.

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Notes

[1] There were eight people out of the twenty who included postscripts. Out of these eight, six wrote 'P.S.' before their added comment, and two wrote nothing before their added comment.

[2] Out of these twenty people, only one included a postscript, and she wrote 'P.S.' in front of her added comment, instead of the Chinese *fu*.